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AUTHOR Bonyun, Rosemary
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ABSTRACT

Attitudes toward French language programs and future language plans were surveyed in a sample of students who had participated in Ottawa school district bilingual programs. A total of 178 completed questionnaires were returned by students who had registered in grade 12 French language classes in 1978 to 1980. The majority of the students had entered a bilingual program in grades 7-9. A large portion of the respondents had gone on to take enough credits to gain Ottawa's Honors Bilingual Diploma, planned to take further instruction in French at some point, felt that they could cope confidently with the receptive use of French, and believed they could also write and speak with facility. Respondents also felt that the bilingual program had many positive features, most notably its French literature component. Other well-liked features were the high quality of the teachers, the grammar courses, and the field trips. The three most common suggestions for program inprovement related to wider course selection, better teachers, and more emphasis on oral practice. About 50 percent of the group felt that kindergarten or grade 1 was the optimal time for starting an immersion or bilingual program. While students noted that program participation required isolation from the main stream of school activities, many lasting friendships were formed among participants. (RW)

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DOES A LATE IMMERSION PROGRAM MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO THE GRADUATES?

Rosemary Bonyun

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1969, the Ottawa Board of Education expressed its concern for second language learning in the nation's capital by implementing a kindergarten-entry French immersion program, expanding it the following year to classes in seven schools. By November, 1970, the Board had also approved "in principle" the establishment of a bilingual high school; a committee was struck to study the feasibility of such a concept and in January 1972 a survey was distributed to grade 8 and 9 students and their parents in order to determine the degree of interest in such a program. In the letter accompanying the survey, the proposed school was described as follows:

> - In this proposed school the students (either French or English speaking) may carry on their studies at the secondary level of education and at the same time, perfect their second language as well as preserve their native tongue. In order to achieve this, approximately one-half of the subjects will be taught in French during the whole year and the other subjects in English. It is expected that French and English speaking students in the Bilingual High School would intermingle in a spirit of cooperation in furthering the aims and objectives of the school.

As a result of the favourable reaction of a substantial portion of the population, in the fall of 1972 a group of about 30 grade 9 students embarked on this new venture. Ten years have passed and this group has been out of the school system for some time, but the basic concept of the program - that students be able to learn French and simultaneously obtain their high school credits by taking approximately half their courses in French - is still very much alive.

Over the past ten years, students in the Ottawa Board have had available to them some or all of three different programs which emphasize the learning of French (in addition to the regular English program

with 20 to 40 minutes of "core" French per day): kindergarten-entry immersion (begun in 1969-70), the high school bilingual program (initiated in 1972-73) and a grade 6 entry immersion program started in 1973-74. Students in the high school bilingual program were reaching grade 12 as early as 1976, but the first group to have experienced the full late-entry immersion program reached grade 12 only in 1979-80. As the number of students from late-entry immersion in the high school bilingual program increased, there was a corresponding decline in the number starting a bilingual program at the grade 9 level, until this option has all but disappeared. As the first cohorts of kindergarten-entry immersion reached high school, another shift in the composition of the bilingual high school group took place.

A student who has taken at least 13 high school credits in French is entitled to the Ottawa Board's "Bilingual Certificate". It is customary for students to take four subjects in French in each of the first two years of high school and two or three in grades 11 and 12. Originally, history, geography and mathematics were offered in French at the grade 9 and 10 levels, in addition to courses in French Language and Literature. As the program expanded to the upper levels and other schools, courses in dramatic arts, economics and certain sciences in French were included in the program in some schools.

In the spring of 1981 and 1982, surveys were conducted of grade 12 students in an Ottawa bilingual program in order to obtain information about their plans for the future and attitudes towards the program they had followed. To extend this information, questionnaires were distributed to graduates of the bilingual program who had been in grade 12 in

1978-79 and 1979-80. Questionnaires were sent by mail to all but four of the 270 students who had been registered in grade 12 French Language classes in those years; a final total of 178 completed questionnaires represents a return rate of about 65 per cent.

RESULTS

High School Background

The majority of respondents from both the 1979 and 1980 cohorts had entered a bilingual program in grade 7, 8 or 9 (85 per cent of the first group of respondents and 70 per cent of the second). In addition, the second group included 16 students who were part of the first cohort of the Ottawa Board's grade 6 entry immersion program. From 10 to 15 per cent of the groups came from French-language schools or other programs outside the Ottawa Board.

Over 90 per cent of the respondents from both cohorts had completed the required credits for grade 13 and their OSSHGD. Only two former students had not finished grade 12 while a handful had left school with an OSSGD. This proportion is similar to the percentage of the grade 12 group who expect to take grade 13.

Table 1 indicates the number of French courses taken in high school by these two groups of students. Nearly 90 per cent of this group appears to have attained the 13 French credits needed for the Bilingual Certificate. There was a tendency, not quite reaching significant levels, for more of the first group to take additional courses in French.

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF FRENCH COURSES TAKEN IN HIGH SCHOOL BY TWO GROUPS OF OTTAWA GRADUATES OF A BILINGUAL PROGRAM, SPRING 1982

Response	1979 group N	1979 group %	1980 group N	1980 group %	Total group N	Total group %
Less than 10	3	4	4	4	7	4
10 to 12	2	3	10	10	12	7
13 or 14	34	45	54	53	88	50
15 or 16	26	35	27	27	53	30
More than 16	10	13	6	6	16	9
TOTAL	75	100	101	100	176	100

Activities since Leaving School

From questions about their current job or studies it appeared that 144 respondents (about 80 per cent of the total group) were either full- or part-time students at universities or community colleges. A total of 26 former students were at work at the time the questionnaires were completed, but of these half had plans to return to a university or college course in September 1982 or later. Six respondents were completing high school courses and two were looking for work. It appears that this group, like the grade 12 groups examined in other surveys, has a strong orientation towards post-secondary education.

It was determined that about 45 per cent of the respondents in the first cohort had taken the two or more French courses in grade 13 required for the Ottawa Board's Honours Bilingual Diploma, while just under 30 per cent of the second group had done so. In first year university, nearly half of the first group and 30 per cent of the second

had taken at least one French course. Seven students appear to have taken half or more of their university courses in French, including one who had spent a year at Laval.

Of those who had taken a French course at the post-secondary level, 40 per cent said they had experienced some difficulty in obtaining a suitable course. The majority of the problems hinged on either finding a course of a suitable level of difficulty or the intransigence of the university in not permitting an apparently qualified student to take more advanced courses.

About two thirds of the respondents described experiences they had had since leaving school which had increased their proficiency in French. Over a quarter mentioned the need to use French in a work situation, and about 15 per cent had spent some time (ranging from a week to 10 months) in a French-speaking area. Close to 10 per cent of the group noted specifically courses at the post-secondary level and a similar proportion mentioned social experiences.

Plans for the Future

About half of the total group planned or hoped to take further instruction in French at some point. The percentage of those wishing to take further courses was about the same for the group which had already taken a French course since high school as for the group which had not.

Some respondents were very specific when asked about their career goals, while others hoped simply to get a job in their field or did not have definite plans. As many as 15 to 20 per cent of the former stu-

dents in these groups anticipated further education after completion of their present program, while another quarter of them mentioned this either in addition to or as an alternative to plans for a job.

When asked what role they expected the French language to play in future jobs or education, over 15 per cent of the respondents mentioned the study of French, sometimes citing interest courses or doing it for pleasure rather than for practical reasons and in a few cases noting the possibility of study at a French university or abroad. Most responses to this question, however, pertained to the job market. About a quarter of the group thought that a knowledge of French would be an asset when looking for a job, while a similar proportion stated or implied that they expected to have to use French in their chosen career. A smaller number hoped to have a job where they could use their skills in French. Another group, comprising about 15 per cent of the respondents, gave comments about the general value of knowing French.

French Proficiency

Table 2 shows how these former students rated their French listening, reading, writing and speaking proficiency. It can be seen that over two thirds of the group felt they could cope confidently with the receptive use of French (listening and reading) and about one third believed they could do so in writing and speaking, the productive aspects of the language.

TABLE 2

ASSESSMENT OF THEIR FRENCH PROFICIENCY BY TWO GROUPS
OF OTTAWA GRADUATES OF A BILINGUAL PROGRAM, SPRING 1982

Skill area	Rating	Responses N	Responses %
Listening	With considerable difficulty	0	0
	Adequately	49	28
	With confidence	129	72
	TOTAL	178	100
Reading	With considerable difficulty	0	0
	Adequately	50	28
	With confidence	128	72
	TOTAL	178	100
Writing	With considerable difficulty	18	10
	Adequately	99	56
	With confidence	60	34
	TOTAL	177	100
Speaking	With considerable difficulty	22	12
	Adequately	93	53
	With confidence	62	35
	TOTAL	177	100

About 15 per cent of the group added a comment about a lack of sufficient emphasis in high school on "oral" or "practical" French skills. About ten per cent of the group felt their French had deteriorated since leaving high school because of lack of use; an additional five per cent noted the tendency to get rusty but included as well a more positive statement to the effect that things improved with practice. Just over five per cent of the group attributed their French learning mainly to experiences outside the bilingual program.

Table 3 indicates the responses to a question asking students to compare their achievement with what they had expected to achieve on entering the program. There was a tendency (not quite significant) for a higher proportion of the second cohort to feel they had attained less than they had expected.

TABLE 3

RESPONSES TO A QUESTION ON HOW THEIR LEVEL OF FRENCH PROFICIENCY COMPARED WITH WHAT HAD BEEN EXPECTED BY TWO GROUPS OF OTTAWA GRADUATES OF A BILINGUAL PROGRAM, SPRING 1982

Response	1979 group		1980 group		Total group	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
More than expected	21	29	16	16	37	22
About what expected	38	51	50	51	88	51
Less than expected	15	20	32	33	47	27
TOTAL	74	100	98	100	172	100

$\chi^2 = 5.217$, df = 2, $0.05 < p < 0.10$

A number of respondents who said they had learned more than expected noted that their French was very poor to start with or that they had not been sure what to expect but were pleased with what they had accomplished. About 85 per cent of those who indicated that they were not as good as they had expected to be added a comment, most often mentioning that they had not had enough oral practice.

A final question about French proficiency asked about preparedness for using French in a job situation or further education. Of the 176 respondents to this question, 47 (or over 25 per cent) appeared very confident of their ability to handle French, some clearly because they had already coped successfully in a job. Another 36 seemed also fairly sure of themselves, but did not state this quite so strongly, using expressions such as adequately, quite well or fairly well. Still another 37 former students seemed to feel they would perform satisfactorily in the long run, but mentioned an initial period of adjustment or the need for a refresher course. Others mentioned specific limitations, while a total of 23 students appeared to feel generally unprepared to use French, several of them mentioning particularly the oral aspect. Three respondents said they could manage courses in French but not a job, while two said the reverse.

Opinions about the Bilingual Program

Respondents cited a broad range of items in replying to a question about particularly good aspects of the bilingual program. They included a number of specific courses or activities as well as more general qualities of the program or personnel involved in it. The aspect mentioned more often than any other was the French literature program; over a third of both groups spoke of a particular course or the literature program in general. Several respondents noted particularly the benefit of being able to read the works of French authors in the language in which they had been written.

Three other areas that were each mentioned by about 15 per cent of the group were: the high calibre of teachers in the program, the French language or grammar courses, and the field trips such as exchanges or the French drama series at the National Arts Centre. Nearly ten per cent of the group tried in some way to describe the benefit of hearing French used throughout the class and of being encouraged to speak French; oral presentations, smaller classes, and the total immersion experience in grade 6 were all mentioned in this connection.

Most respondents could also suggest some improvements that they would like to see implemented in the bilingual program. In Table 4, which summarizes the most frequently made suggestions, it will be seen that the same four items headed the list for both groups.

TABLE 4

IMPROVEMENTS TO THE BILINGUAL PROGRAM SUGGESTED BY TWO GROUPS OF OTTAWA GRADUATES, SPRING 1982

Change suggested	Number from group 1979	1980
Wider course selection	16	19
Better teachers	14	16
More emphasis on oral, conversation	14	16
More outside/extracurricular activities	8	14
Only French spoken in class	6	9
Better ways of teaching grammar	3	12
Expansion to more schools, levels	4	10
Better texts and materials	5	3
Streaming by French proficiency	5	3
No comment	15	19
TOTAL N	76	102

A wider selection of courses was desired by almost 25 per cent of those who offered comments; specific suggestions included science courses, so that students specializing in this area would not have to sacrifice the study of French, and courses such as art or music, which would provide more opportunities for conversation in French. Good teachers, with fluent French and a thorough background in their subject, were noted as a need by about 20 per cent of respondents. Enthusiasm was mentioned as a necessary teacher characteristic several times.

About 20 per cent of those who answered this question felt more provision was needed for oral work or conversation within the classroom structure. Fifteen per cent suggested additional out-of-school or extracurricular activities (such as exchanges with Quebec or local French schools) to provide more opportunity to use "real" French. About 20 per cent said that it was imperative for teachers and students alike to speak French at all times in the clasroom. There also seemed to be a widespread feeling that grammar or the basics of the language could be taught more effectively or made more interesting.

Many other suggestions, both general and specific, were made by individual students. But it is apparent from perusing the replies to this question and the preceding one that there are a few concerns that the students consider of prime importance: the teachers, the course selection, and more opportunities to use French, especially in speaking.

Optimal Grade for Starting Immersion

Just about half of the group thought that kindergarten or grade 1 was the optimal time for starting an immersion or bilingual program, while the alternatives "between grade 2 and grade 5" and "between grade 6 and grade 8" were selected by 18 and 26 per cent of the group, respectively. On the one hand, it was felt by some respondents that young children learn more easily and will have more time in the school system for learning, and on the other hand, some thought that children should get a good basis in English before starting immersion. Several tried to pinpoint why they felt younger children had an advantage, using such phrases as:

- they are not concerned with marks, learning is fun
- not embarrassed to try to speak French
- less chance of developing bias and insensitivity towards other languages and cultures.

Effects of the Bilingual Program

In analyzing the responses to the question about the effects of the bilingual program, the first step taken was to determine the number of former students who cited positive effects, negative effects, both or neither. This tabulation is shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5

NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF TWO GROUPS OF OTTAWA GRADUATES CITING POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THE BILINGUAL PROGRAM, SPRING 1982

Type of effects	1979 group		1980 group		Total group	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Positive effects	41	54	40	39	81	45
Negative effects	7	9	10	10	17	10
Both pos. and neg.	22	29	44	43	66	37
No effects	3	4	2	2	5	3
No response	3	4	6	6	9	5
TOTAL	76	100	102	100	178	100

The next step in the analysis of the answers to this question was to break down each response into the individual points made, to classify each as positive or negative and to group them into general categories and subcategories. This process is an approximation at best, since dangers of misinterpreting or taking remarks out of context are considerable and the lists of effects given by students are not necessarily exhaustive. However, it was felt that the hazards of this type of answering mode were outweighed by the advantage of providing an opportunity for these former students to express their thoughts on this topic. Thus Tables 6 and 7 are intended to convey a general impression of the types of effect, positive and negative, respectively, that these respondents felt were a result of their high school bilingual program.

TABLE 6

POSITIVE EFFECTS OF THE BILINGUAL PROGRAM CITED BY TWO GROUPS OF OTTAWA GRADUATES, SPRING 1982

Effects of program	Number of statements made	
	1979 group (76 respondents)	1980 group (102 respondents)
Knowledge		
Increased knowledge of French	16	31
Practical		
Helpful in job or job prospects	21	18
Openings to post-secondary courses, etc.	3	6
Useful in general		7
Useful in travel to French-speaking areas	2	4
Opened doors to cultural/recreational activities	2	
Can use both English and French materials		1
Social		
Good teaching, student-teacher relations	1	3
Enjoyed people, made friends	3	12
Close group, family atmosphere	6	5
Academic		
High standards, competition, motivation		5
Self-discipline, study habits, challenge	7	9
Better educational background	1	
Covered topics more thoroughly	1	
Cultural		
Learned about French Canadian culture	5	7
Openness to people of different cultures		5
General		
Positive effects, asset, advantage	10	7
Enjoyed courses, provided variety	5	6
Knowing second language is a good thing		4
No loss of English skills		3
Good French literature program	3	
Other	5	8

TABLE 7

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THE BILINGUAL PROGRAM CITED BY TWO GROUPS OF OTTAWA GRADUATES, SPRING 1982

Effects of program	Number of statements made	
	1979 group (76 respondents)	1980 group (102 respondents)
Program		
Limited course selection	8	27
Social		
Isolation from main stream of school life	4	5
Distance, travel time to bilingual high school	2	2
Separation from public school friends	1	
Academic		
English courses and/or marks suffered	4	8
Program harder, took more time	4	6
French courses inferior, learned less	3	1
Difficulty switching languages, only French vocabulary	1	1
Afraid of missing something	1	
General		
Loss of English skills		7
Have not used French, have lost some skill since high school	3	2
Did not enjoy courses	1	3
Not prepared for university		2
Would like to know more French		2
Other	5	3

As expected, the learning of French was one of the most often noted effects of the program. Not only was the increased French proficiency an underlying factor in many responses, but the statement was often expressed in terms that implied a pleasure in being able to communicate or pride in this skill. It was also mentioned by some that

this knowledge had enabled them to get jobs, take courses, travel to French speaking areas and participate in a broader range of cultural and recreational activities. Several respondents also felt that their outlook had been broadened by their exposure to a second language and culture.

The most frequently mentioned negative effect was the restriction on course choice; because of the necessity of taking four courses in French, including language and literature and two other academic courses offered in French, some felt they had not been able to take courses that would have been of either interest or benefit to them. The answers to this question may be seen as reinforcing those which suggested that a wider selection of courses in French was a needed change in the program.

The nature of the bilingual program itself had effects on the participants' high school careers which were seen as either positive or negative. Although the requirements of the program were seen as isolating them from the main stream of school life by some students, a similar number viewed the development of friendships within the department as a positive factor for students in a large high school. The high calibre of most students in the program and the nature of the course load meant that bilingual-program participants felt they had to work harder than other students. This fact was seen as necessitating good work habits on the one hand and as resulting in lower marks or the neglect of English courses on the other. The effects felt are clearly a matter of individual aims, experiences and preferences.